

Witness Name: Graeme Dey

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: GD

Dated: 13 November 2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF Graeme Dey

In relation to the issues raised by the Rule 9 request dated June 12, 2023 in connection with Module [2a], reference M2A-GD01, I, Graeme Dey, will say as follows: -

1. I am Graeme Dey MSP. I presently serve in the Scottish Government as Minister for Higher and Further Education and Minister for Veterans, a role I have held since March 30, 2023. During the period in question, I served in the role of Minister for Transport (May 20, 2021 – January 24, 2022) and before that (from June 2018 until May 2021) I occupied the post of Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans. As Minister for Transport, in the context of Covid 19, I was principally involved in decision making relating to the provision of public transport during the Pandemic, taking account of all relevant public health advice.
2. I have prepared this statement myself by reference to records and material provided to me by the Scottish Government. I have also received assistance from the Scottish Government Covid Inquiry Information Governance Division.
3. Unless stated otherwise, the facts stated in this witness statement are within my own knowledge and are true. Where they are not within my own knowledge, they are derived from sources to which I refer and are true to the best of my knowledge and belief. During the period in question I did not have a Scottish Government device. I have however, checked twice my Whatsapp and Text

messages as held on my parliamentary phone and covering that timeframe and have found nothing of relevance to the purpose of the inquiry.

4. References to exhibits in this statement are in the form [GD/number - INQ000000].

Cabinet

5. As Minister for Transport, I attended Cabinet during this period only as a substitute for Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport Michael Matheson when he was otherwise engaged on Government business. This occurred only twice, on October 26 and November 30 of 2021. On these occasions I would have provided an update on relevant portfolio matters, Covid 19 related and others.

Four Nation interactions

6. I attended two meetings of the COVID(O) COVID-19 Operations Committee, in place of Cabinet Secretary Michael Matheson, on borders-related matters. These took place on October 7, 2021 and November 4, 2021. Please see record of meeting for the October 7 meeting, provided [GD/001 - INQ000247110].
7. At the first of these I presented the views of the Scottish Government around proposals to substantially reduce the number of countries on the Red List.
8. At the second I represented the views of the Scottish Government in relation to proposals around extending the list of vaccines recognized for international travel and removing the requirement for self-isolation for nine categories for transport and border workers. Ahead of those meetings I received briefings from public health officials outlining the rationale of the Scottish Government's position.

Specifics of my role as Transport Minister

9. In the context of Covid I had two main roles. Firstly, oversight of ensuring that adequate public transport provision was available, particularly for key workers. Secondly the Health based decisions taken by Cabinet (principally around social distancing and mask wearing) were reflected in the operational running of public transport. Sitting alongside the former was decision making on deployment of extension of additional funding support in recognition of reduced usage of services owing to the Pandemic. Towards the end of my tenure a tension developed with bus operators who from my perspective seemed to have an expectation that these additional funding support would continue to be available and at a level they deemed appropriate for as long as they felt it necessary, whereas I believed that as passengers returned, we should be tapering off the support.

10. I was involved, for a relatively short period, in providing ministerial approval of requests for close contact exemptions for staff in critical transport roles to return to work. This involved considering submissions from officials outlining the rationale for requests and whether these were captured by a criteria of critical transport roles.

11. I was also engaged in approving high level/strategic service/timetable changes around ferries and trains reflecting both the public health situation as it stood and the impact of Covid 19 on availability of crew. These decisions were informed by detailed information provided around both staffing and usage of services. Towards the end of 2021 we had scaled back rail and ferry services owing to growing infection rates. There was a particular issue with the spread of the virus amongst CalMac ferry crews which in percentage terms was higher than amongst rail workers. This was felt, at the time, to be due, at least in part, to some ferry crews living on board vessels and therefore being in close proximity to each other for extended periods.

12. My role involved regular interaction with transport providers e.g., Scotrail, Caledonian MacBrayne, Confederation of Passenger Transport, Northern Isles Ferry operator. This often covered general transport delivery matters but inevitably Covid impacts and the enforcement of related measures featured. This

happened most notably on Saturday July 28, 2021, when it was deemed necessary, due to concerns over increasing infection rates, to ask bus operators, Scotrail, Loganair and ferry operators to reinforce compliance messaging. I always felt these meetings were constructive and that the operators were doing as much as they could especially when staff, perhaps understandably, were reluctant to become involved in actively requesting/encouraging compliance.

13. I had less frequent engagement with representatives of the aviation sector including airport operators. But I did have a number of conversations with Loganair – on July 28, 10 October, and 4 November 2021, specifically on Covid related matters such as compliance and how this was being enforced and the challenges around maintaining services in the face of Pandemic challenges. (See, for example, note of meeting with Loganair on July 28, 2021, [GD/002 – INQ000346069])
14. It will, I hope, be recognised that given I came into post as Transport Minister well into the Pandemic and served (in a relatively minor role) only for a limited period there are a number of questions posed in Annex B which I am not best placed to provide views on from the perspective of Transport.
15. However, there is no doubt in my mind that the Scottish Government treated the public health threat extremely seriously, was always guided by the health advice provided and I at all times felt comfortable with the position taken on public transport measures.
16. I would though offer the following reflections -
 - a) Divergence on masking wearing on trains which crossed the border with England did create some minor issues. Once passengers started to be allowed to travel without wearing masks on trains down south there was a degree of confusion and a problem of compliance with Scottish rules which still required masks to be worn. But the cross-border operators and British Transport Police did engage constructively with the Scottish

Government. I met with BTP Chief Constable Lucy D’Orsi on July 7 and August 7, 2021, when these matters were discussed. And a proportionate position, e.g., on board announcements when trains were approaching Scotland, was arrived at.

- b) Our public transport providers did their best to ensure mask wearing and social distancing compliance and used a variety of means to reinforce messaging. But there were issues over staff, in some instances, feeling unable to enforce this and a request to the Government from bus operators for assistance in this regard from Police Scotland could not be met. In essence bus operators were looking for help around ensuring passengers had donned masks before boarding vehicle but whilst this was raised with the Police, they felt unable to assist.
- c) The longer restrictions were in place so tensions arose with airport operators, who were keen to better understand the rationale for retaining certain public health measures and adjustments to these as they impacted them and felt the adverse impact of restrictions on their businesses was not fully appreciated. I had, as I recall, two virtual meetings with operators and airline representatives on these subjects. At least one of these meetings was complimented I think by follow up briefings for them from public health officials.

General observation

17. I am struck reading my ministerial engagements diary, in order to provide this statement, by just how much our response to the Pandemic on the Transport front became woven into the everyday workings of public transport in Scotland. The normal business of transport and the multiple facets of that – the decarbonization agenda, threatened industrial action on the railways, COP26, rolling out free bus travel for under 22s, progressing STPR2 to name but a few – very much continued in the midst of the day to day, sometimes substantial, delivery challenges that Covid set us. And on reflection that probably speaks well

of the way in which the sector as a whole responded. It adapted well to some significant operational change.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed:

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Dated: 13 November 2023